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AUTHOR Almeida, Deirdre A.
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ABSTRACT

Teaching from an antibias perspective means going beyond conventional multicultural education and introducing students to a working concept of diversity that challenges social stereotypes and discrimination. This digest describes current inadequacies in teaching about Native Americans, suggests ways to avoid common pitfalls, and provides guidelines for detecting anti-Indian bias in instructional materials. Three obstacles to providing better instruction about American Indians and Alaska Natives are lack of training in teacher education programs, ongoing racist portrayals of Native Americans in the larger society, and difficulties in locating sources of trustworthy materials. When teaching about Native Americans, teachers often favor approaches that portray Native Americans as extinct, or that allow students to experience only the exotic components of a Native culture. Both approaches teach simplistic generalizations about other peoples and lead to stereotyping rather than understanding. Teachers must begin by examining their own underlying beliefs about Native Americans and by critically questioning cultural images in books and the mass media, then use this knowledge to develop an antibias curriculum. Antibias learning may be integrated into the entire curriculum through a technique called webbing. Types of instructional materials to avoid are those that make sweeping generalizations about Native Americans, present only colonizers' perspectives, exploit Native American cultural and spiritual traditions for profit, or lack respect for Native intellectual property rights and indigenous knowledge. Contains 15 references and resources. (SV)

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Countering Prejudice Against American Indians and Alaska Natives Through Antibias Curriculum and Instruction

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Throughout the 1990s, forward-looking educators have continued to call for major changes in U.S. schools, including changes that celebrate—rather than denigrate—the diversity in American culture and language usage (Macedo, 1994). One result of this important reform movement has been the development of an *antibias perspective* in curriculum and instruction. Teaching from an antibias perspective means introducing students to a working concept of diversity that challenges social stereotypes and discrimination. Antibias teaching goes beyond traditional multicultural education and *gives students tools for identifying and counteracting* the hurtful impact of bias on themselves and their peers (LeeKeenan, 1993).

This Digest describes current inadequacies in teaching about Native Americans—even when teachers are making an effort to portray American Indians and Alaska Natives respectfully—and suggests ways to avoid common pitfalls. The Digest provides guidelines for detecting anti-Indian bias in the curriculum and offers a brief list of Native American-controlled publications and resources.

Current Teaching About Native Americans

Three obstacles to providing better instruction about American Indians and Alaska Natives are (1) lack of training provided by teacher-training programs, (2) ongoing racist portrayals of Native Americans in the larger society, and (3) difficulties in locating sources of trustworthy materials.

Non-Native educators, influenced by biased portrayals of American Indians in their own schooling and in the media, often view Native Americans as exotic, quaint, and even mythological. Unfortunately, too many teacher-training programs still do not include extensive study and research on Native Americans. At best, educators may have heard a lecture on developing instructional activities about Native Americans as part of a multicultural education workshop, or they may have briefly researched Native Americans as part of an anthropology course. Rarely is there the opportunity in college for a prospective educator to take a course focused on Native Americans taught by a Native American faculty member. The result is limited and often inaccurate knowledge on the part of teachers concerning American Indians and Alaska Natives. This compromised experience then gets handed down to the next generation.

Typically, when teaching about Native Americans, teachers favor two approaches in developing their lessons. The first is the "dead-and-buried culture approach," which portrays Native Americans as being extinct. Lessons tend to present information in the past tense, "Indians lived in tipis, they grew corn and hunted buffalo, they were very athletic, they lived in harmony with the land," and so forth. Second is the "tourist approach," where students "visit" a different culture. Just like a vacationing tourist, they experience only the unusual or exotic components of Native American cultures. Neither approach provides non-Native students the tools they need to comfortably interact with American Indians and Alaska Natives. Instead, they teach simplistic generalizations about other peoples and lead to stereotyping, rather than to understanding (Derman-Sparks, 1993-94).

Native American stereotypes are prevalent throughout mainstream society and are a key component of contemporary racism. Teachers and students are exposed to this racist stereotyping, often without being aware it is happening. Television and movies still tend to portray Native Americans only as historic figures, perpetuating false—often romanticized—images among non-Natives. Sporting events, with professional teams' Indian mascots, also contribute to the trivializing of Native American cultures.

Most people are not inclined to critically analyze these images of American Indians and Alaska Natives. Many young people accept as truth what they see on movie and television screens. Protecting children from racism is every bit as important as protecting them from dangerous chemicals; poison is poison. Once instilled, oppressive cultural attitudes are at least as hard to remedy as are imbibed cleaning fluids (Dorris, 1992). An antibias curriculum can serve as an antidote, but unlearning Native American stereotypes is a lifelong struggle. Good teachers help students learn by sharing the mistakes of the past as well as by sharing contemporary understandings (Pewewardy, 1993).

Still other obstacles remain. Finding resources about Native Americans that are not superficial and stereotypical remains a challenge to teachers in developing antibias lessons. Even the most culturally sensitive teacher often lacks the skills needed to evaluate curriculum materials and does not know where to seek out better ones.

Developing Antibias Native American Curriculum

An individual's approach to learning and to demonstrating (or teaching) what he or she has learned is influenced by the values, norms, and socialization practices of the culture in which that individual has been enculturated (Swisher & Deyhle, 1992). It is important, therefore, that before teachers begin developing an antibias curriculum they examine their own underlying beliefs and ideologies about Native Americans. This usually involves an initial period of critically questioning and analyzing most of what they have learned about American Indians and Alaska Natives. Reading books and articles written by Native scholars will help. Some excellent resources for beginning this process are listed at the end of this Digest.

Once a teacher understands the influences that have helped shape his or her personal views of Native Americans, that teacher will be better prepared to assess the knowledge and attitudes of his or her students. Thanks to television, picture books, and movies, children—especially younger ones—continue to be exposed to old, negative stereotypes of Native Americans. Once aware of the images their students bring with them to the classroom, teachers

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can use this knowledge to develop a curriculum that challenges students to develop critical thinking skills in examining these cultural images. There are dangers lurking in any process that leads to the breakdown of stereotypes. Teachers must guard against leading students from viewing Native Americans as primitives or savages to regarding them as only noble and good. Romanticizing Native Americans succeeds only in replacing one unrealistic portrayal with another.

Teachers can integrate antibias learning into the entire curriculum at any education level. One practical technique, called *webbing*, helps teachers and students identify an array of possible topics for interdisciplinary learning (Derman-Sparks, 1993-94). Webbing involves several steps:

- First, determine the center of the web, the theme to be studied. An example is the agricultural techniques of American Indians of New England.
- Step two involves brainstorming possible issues that stem from the theme at the center of the web. Examples could include indigenous dietary practices, the role of Native women in New England and food production, or the connection between the cultivation of land and Native American resistance to colonization.
- In the third step, determine the level of awareness held by each member of the class pertaining to Native Americans and the specific antibias issues of study. Depending on the grade level, develop an exercise or set of questions that requires students to draw from their individual knowledge (including stereotypes) of American Indians in the region. Stories or role-playing can be used to stimulate discussions.
- In the final step, students help brainstorm a list of possible activities that the students and teacher can pursue to fill in the gaps in student knowledge. Incorporating the theme into all subject areas strengthens the antibias aspects of the curriculum. In language arts, students could read a legend about how corn came to a local Indian nation. In science, students could research the varieties of corn grown in the past and today by Native peoples. Mathematics students could calculate the yield produced by indigenous agricultural techniques.

Detecting Anti-Indian Bias in Instructional Materials

Once a teacher begins developing skills in detecting the cultural influences that guide perceptions and beliefs, anti-Indian bias becomes increasingly obvious, especially in instructional materials. There are several types of materials to avoid using with students:

- **Materials that make sweeping generalizations about Native Americans.** Such materials fail to portray the tremendous diversity among Native American cultures today and historically. More trustworthy materials identify American Indians and Alaska Natives by their specific nations, tribes, or villages.
- **Materials that present only the colonizers' perspectives.** These materials lack any Native American perspective or voice. Such a lack of perspective is often referred to as Eurocentrism. U.S. history textbooks that begin with the European discovery of the Americas reveal a Eurocentric bias that disregards the histories of the Indigenous nations of this hemisphere. Another example is world history courses that cover ancient cultures in Asia, Europe, and Africa, but exclude any mention of North and South America. This creates the impression that there was nothing in the Americas worth mentioning until Europeans came.
- **Books and videos that exploit Native American cultural and spiritual traditions for profit.** Some "New Age" spiritual guides commit this error, which many Native Americans find offensive.
- **Lack of respect for Native American intellectual property rights and Indigenous knowledge.** Similar to the New Age publications, this category includes the publication of private or sacred information—such as knowledge about pharmaceuticals or agricultural crop varieties—without the consent of the Native American nation or community that developed them.

It is not always easy to detect these flaws when reviewing materials for classroom use. One way of minimizing anti-Indian bias in curriculum materials is to use Native American-controlled publishers and media distributors whenever possible in exploring American Indian and Alaska Native themes with students. A list of some resources and distributors you may want to consider appears at the end of this Digest.

Conclusion

It is important for teachers to raise their awareness of the influences affecting themselves, their students, and the school culture in general when it comes to beliefs and attitudes regarding American Indians and Alaska Natives. Hopefully, as they become more knowledgeable about bias in the curriculum, teachers will be willing to share their knowledge, instructional approaches, and materials with others, in this way becoming a resource for others to learn about antibias approaches to curriculum and instruction. The development of an antibias perspective in curriculum and instruction about American Indians and Alaska Natives is now and will continue to be an ongoing process, but one that holds great promise. By weaving the concept of shared human experience and cultural diversity into all aspects of the curriculum, the current generation of U.S. teachers and students could be the last one to struggle against the racism and prejudice that have plagued Native Americans and weakened the fabric of American culture.

Suggested Resources

Journals

Akwesasne Notes. Kahniakehaka Nation Territory, P.O. Box 196, Rooseveltown, NY 13683-0196.

Native Americas. Akwe:kon Press, 300 Caldwell Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853.

Native Peoples Magazine. 5333 N. 7th Street, Suite C224, Phoenix, AZ 85014-9943.

Video

Native American Public Telecommunications, P.O. Box 83111, Lincoln, NE 68501-3111.

Books

Champagne, D. (Ed.) (1994). *Native America: Portrait of the Peoples.* Detroit: Visible Ink Press.

Churchill, W. (1994). *Indians are us? Culture and genocide in native North America.* Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press.

Jaimes, M. A. (1992). *The state of Native America: Genocide, colonization, and resistance.* Boston: South End Press.

North American Native Authors Catalog. The Greenfield Review Press, P.O. Box 308, Middle Grove Road, Greenfield Center, NY 12833.

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Derman-Sparks, L. (1993-94, Winter). Empowering children to create a caring culture in a world of differences. *Childhood Education, 70* (2), 66-71.

Dorris, M. (1992). Why I'm not thankful for Thanksgiving. In B. Slapin & D. Seale (Eds.), *Through Indian eyes: The Native experience in books for children* (pp. 19-22). Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.

LeeKeenan, D. (1993). *Strategies for implementing an anti-bias perspective across the curriculum.* Training manual, University of Massachusetts, School of Education, Early Childhood Education Program, Amherst, MA.

Macedo, D. (1994). *Literacies of power: What Americans are not allowed to know.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Pewewardy, C. (1993). *The red road: Culture and education of Native Americans.* Milwaukee: Honor Inc.

Swisher, K., & Deyhle, D. (1992). Adapting instruction to culture. In J. Reyhner (Ed.), *Teaching American Indian students* (pp. 81-95). Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Deirdre A. Almeida (Lenni Lenape/Shawnee) is an assistant professor in the school of education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

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